

"The True Meaning of Friendship..."

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"Be yourself; everyone else is already taken..."

Oscar Wilde

This piece is the follow-on fic for some I wrote a few years ago and more recently. They can be found here.

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"To good friends and great times..." Vincent raised his glass, full of William's best apple cider, to the last of his table companions as somewhere in the distance a clock chimed the hour of two in the morning.

Nobody got up to leave and none made a comment on the lateness of the hour. The New Year had been celebrated in fine style by the tunnel world, but now only the hardiest remained seated comfortably along either side of the long

table in the dining hall as they continued their conversation. Father had left for the warmth of his bed an hour before, saying with a dry chuckle, that he needed to catch up on his beauty sleep.

"And here's to the new century. I wonder what it will bring for all of us," David Jones lifted his glass in acknowledgement of Vincent's toast. "You know, I realised just the other day that I've lived in New York for longer than I've lived anywhere else in the world. It's amazing. I find it strange to think I can now call myself a New Yorker. I never thought I would settle anywhere permanently."

"Nor did I..." Captain Daniel Gregg leaned his forearms on the table before him, turning his glass between his palms. "I had always thought I would die heroically in a battle at sea - and had been more than content with that fate. I wanted to leave my house up in Maine to become a haven for generations of retired seamen."

He sighed, shaking his head ruefully. "Instead, I fell asleep alone and kicked the blasted gas heater on with my blasted foot. I died in my own bedroom and became a super spirit. Now Gull Cottage is my eternal home."

He shrugged. "And yet, that unfortunate accident brought me everything that had always been missing in my earthly life. A family of my own and a woman I love with all my heart. It's odd how fate works sometimes."

"Dying at sea would have been a better death than being burned alive by the angry mob that chased me from my underground home beneath the Paris Opera House. I had thought myself secure," Erik, the Phantom admitted honestly. "If they had caught me I would not be here now in spirit. I too have now lived in this great city for more years than I care to count. I made the best of it, since I had nowhere else to go."

"Well, like Vincent, I was born here," Ron Perlman offered his own point of view, settling his large hand companionably on the shoulder of the lion-faced man beside him. Theirs was a friendship of long-standing, built on a deep sense of trust and understanding. Almost as if they were one being.

Ron jerked his bearded chin up toward the rocky ceiling shrouded in limitless shadows. "Up there on Washington Heights in a cold water, railway flat that allowed for little privacy. But me and my folks, we made the best of it. It is funny what life can throw at us."

He too shook his head. "It seems so long ago, now..."

"I hear you...", David nodded slowly. "I was born in Brixton in London. I guess you can take the boy out of the city, but the city will always do it's best to reclaim your soul in the end, no matter how far away we try to run."

"Yeah, ain't that right," Ron agreed.

He frowned at his left hand where he held a fat cigar, the tip glowing red. "I know something I ain't gonna get used to. Not smoking a cigar on a momentous

occasion such as this. The docs have told me I have to give 'em up soon, or they'll kill me."

He raised the stogie to his lips and puffed on it with a contented sigh. "Maybe I will, maybe I won't," he breathed through the fragrant wreath of smoke he'd created.

"Take it from someone who knows, living is better," Daniel replied. "I wish that I were alive again every time I look at Carolyn. She has become my beloved wife, and my entire world, yet we still cannot touch each other in this life."

"As do I wish it could be so," Erik agreed. "But I can admit the spirit world does have its advantages. I may go where and when I please."

"I can see the advantages of not being seen in your travels." Vincent turned to look at the ghostly man across the table from him. "I am still confined to the shadows every time I need to go Above. No matter the century, some things will never change, it seems. I will never find acceptance in the city above. I have come to terms with that."

He studied his friend's handsome face. There was no longer any need for Erik to be cloaked in a mask and wide-brimmed hat. He was still tall and willowy, but his face was now calm and serene, and as ordinary as any man's. His elegant, nineteenth-century clothes were dark and he wore a crisp white linen shirt evident at his neck and wrists.

Vincent nodded. "And you have your Christine with you in the afterlife. That must count for something."

"Ah, yes. For that I am eternally grateful every day." The Phantom shook his head. "But to smell the flowers again or feel the warmth of the sun on my face. The movement of fine silk against your skin cannot be beaten. Nor the intoxicating taste of a good cider such as this..."

He swirled the contents of his glass. "The simple things are those I do miss at times when I am alone." He raised the glass to his lips and took a long sip. "But in good company such a fine brew still goes down as well as it always did," he concluded on the ghost of a laugh.

"Then I guess the three of us who are still alive had better stay that way for some time to come." Ron shrugged, looking around the table at his friends, both living and ghostly. "I plan on living a lot longer than my old man did."

"Well, none of us are alone tonight," David pointed out. "Our wives are asleep in their chambers and we still have time to hang out and tell outrageous lies to each other. That suits me just fine. There is nowhere else I would rather be than right here with all of you."

He raised his glass to his companions and took a long drain of the brew. He smacked his lips. "My compliments to the barrel master. I do believe this the finest William has ever made."

"He'll be pleased to hear it." Vincent smiled. "He's very proud of it and is saving the rest for this year's Winterfest."

"Ah yes, our annual gathering." David smiled. "That I intend to enjoy. I missed last year's when I had to go back to the UK."

"I too am looking forward to it," Daniel added. "I can't believe its been over thirty years since that first night you and I met in Gull Cottage, Vincent."

"You spirited Catherine and I there to reclaim your book that had been stolen from your collection," Vincent acknowledged. "It was an interesting evening - even if it was a dream."

"And instead of reclaiming that book, I found a life-long friend." Daniel smiled. "And you returned the favour by giving me a first-edition, signed copy of my Tennyson, in better condition than my own."

"It was the least I could do since your copy was a gift to me from Catherine that I couldn't part with." Vincent grinned. "And you'd already met the great man, Tennyson, in person at the Great Exhibition in 1851. That counted for something. I envy you that privilege."

"Ain't true love grand?" Ron saluted with a flourish of his glass. "To our wives, who do try to keep us all in line and on the straight and narrow, bless 'em."

He reached for the large glass jug to pour himself a refill. "Most of the time."

"To our wives..." The other four men joined in the toast, all with looks of total agreement.

"And here is to the true meaning of friendship," Vincent added quietly, looking at each of his friends in turn. "That, whatever happens or whatever comes, we will always have each other's backs. Nothing and no one will ever come between us."

"To whatever happens, whatever comes..." each man agreed in turn, raising their glasses.

"All for one and one for all about says it..." Ron stubbed out his cigar in a nearby ash tray, as he studied the lion-faced man beside him.

The stranger he'd first met up in the park more years ago than he cared to remember. It made him feel old to count back so far, so he dismissed the thought. There was time enough to make some new memories.

He grinned at Vincent knowingly. "Always, my friend. Always..."



"Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom..."

Aristotle